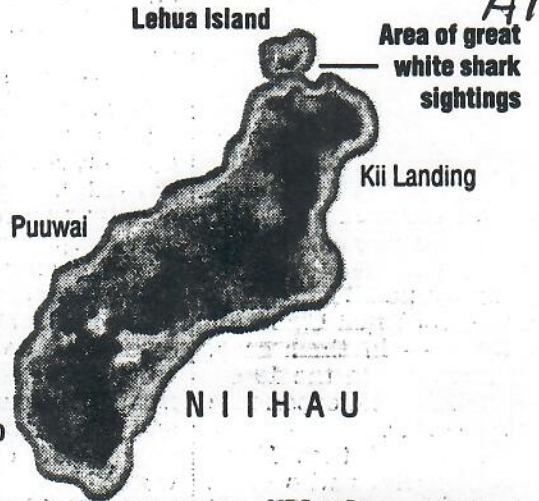


Giant shark seen off Niihau, Lehua



By Jan TenBruggencate
Advertiser Kauai Bureau

LIHUE, Kauai — Kauai residents have reported a huge shark, possibly a great white, in the waters off Niihau and Lehua.

A group of free divers was frightened out of the water near Lehua recently by a very large shark, according to people operating diving companies.

And Bruce Robinson, manager of Niihau Ranch, saw a large shark two weeks ago off Lehua from the Niihau Helicopters aircraft.

"This thing was huge. I'm pretty sure it was a white," he said. "It had a conical head and was 20 to 25 feet long, but whether it was a gray nurse or

a blue, I don't know. I know it wasn't a whale shark. I've seen plenty of those."

Robinson, who is also a diver, said he has come face to face with a 6-foot white shark in the water off Niihau, and identified a small white caught by Niihau residents while they were fishing.

"No question in my mind, they're there," he said.

Marine experts warn against any effort to kill off large sharks. The big shark hasn't bothered anyone, and wiping out large predators can cause more problems than it solves, experts say. For one thing, they are the major predators of nearshore shark species, whose numbers rise when the big sharks are removed.

Big sharks have been seen

in the area before. Linda Ball, co-owner of Bubbles Below Scuba Charters, said she saw an immense shark there two years ago. But despite an active diving schedule, she hasn't seen it since. She didn't get a good look at the head and couldn't identify it, she said.

"It was a very, very large shark. The shark is out there, and I can't guarantee what it

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"You've got to have a lot of prey to keep biomass of that size going."

— JOHN NAUGHTON
RESEARCHER, NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

Great White Shark

Carcharodon carcharias

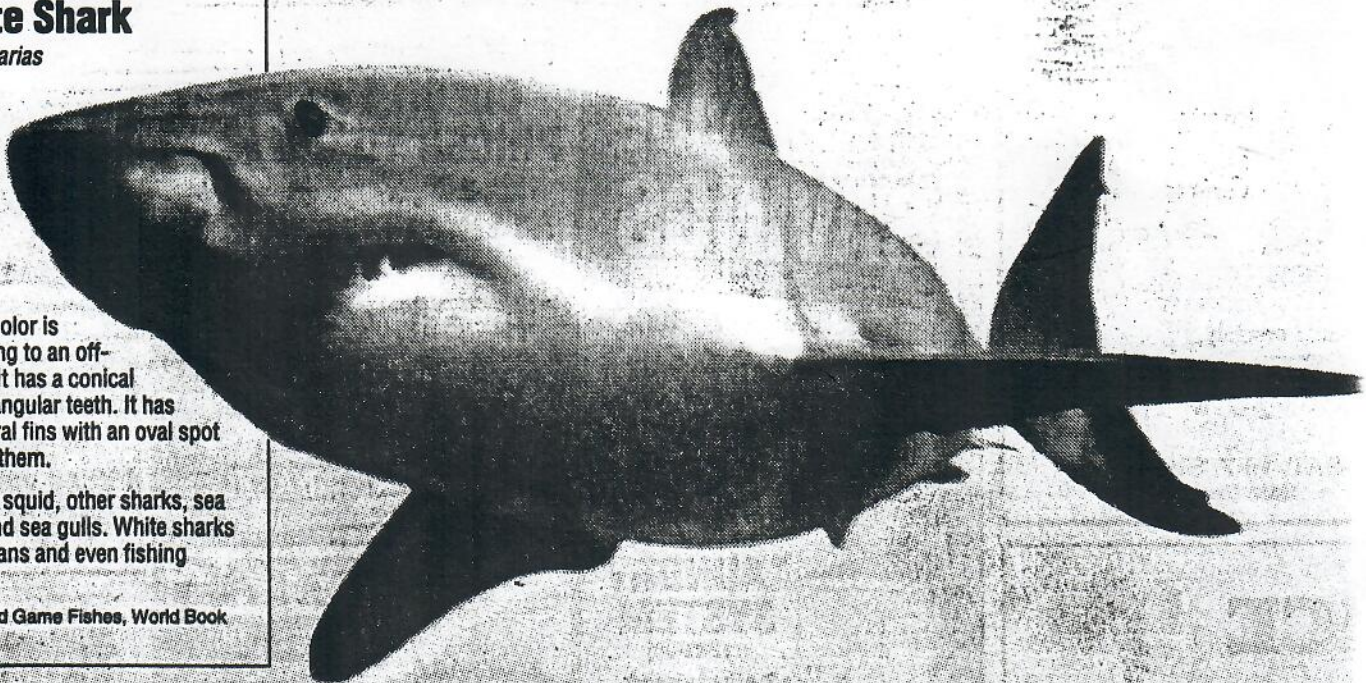
Length: Adults are 11-14 feet; can grow as long as 21 feet.

Habitat: Cool temperate to tropical waters.

Description: Skin color is grayish brown fading to an off-white on the belly. It has a conical snout and large triangular teeth. It has black-tipped pectoral fins with an oval spot on the body above them.

Diet: Includes fish, squid, other sharks, sea turtles, sea lions and sea gulls. White sharks have attacked humans and even fishing boats.

Source: World Record Game Fishes, World Book Encyclopedia



Shark: Great white may be cruising off Niihau

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was," Bail said. "It was very fat. Its width was what was impressive."

A National Marine Fisheries Service researcher, John Naughton, said his discussion with Bail indicates she almost certainly saw a great white. He said these are rare, but not unknown, in the Hawaiian Islands.

Naughton said a young great white might be confused with other species, but with age, "a white gets very thick."

Bail said she believes the big shark she saw was passing through. It was June 1995, a period when Hawaii's ocean water temperature was much colder than usual and could have attracted a species normally found in colder waters, she said.

Following the food

Waikiki Aquarium shark expert Jerry Crow said a big great white might have trouble finding enough to eat around Hawaii and might be following a food source.

"It could possibly be following the migration of humpback whales from Alaska to Hawaii, but that's unknown," he said. The shark could also feed on porpoises, which the species is known to do in the Mediterranean, Naughton said. Crow added: "It would probably feed more on weak and injured animals."

Naughton said great white sharks normally frequent areas with a lot of prey, such as seal and sea lion rookeries.

Hawaiian monk seals have established a small but growing population at Niihau, but Naughton said that would probably not provide enough food to meet the needs of a giant great white.

"You've got to have a lot of prey to keep biomass of that size going," he said.

Naughton reported that seals around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands show a healthy respect for big sharks, including whites.

"In all the years I've been working, including shark fishing, I've only seen two. One was when we were diving at Laysan (one of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands). We had a huge one swim over us — it was at least 14 or 15 feet — and the seals obviously knew it was there. They dove into caves to hide," he said.

The shark did not bother the human divers, he said. Naughton said neither great whites nor tigers, the more common big Hawaiian sharks, normally attack divers far below the surface or on the bottom. They more commonly go after seals or other prey on the surface, he said.

Waikiki Aquarium's Crow said, though, that great whites are not predictable.

"White sharks have carried off divers off Australia... If they're in a feeding mode, they take very large prey. They usually come from behind and you usually don't see them," Crow said.

Great whites are rarely caught, but Naughton said he is aware of three cases in which

white sharks were caught by anglers, mainly along the Big Island's Kona coast. Crow said during shark-control fishing in Hawaii in 1959 and 1960, two whites were caught off the Big Island, an 11-footer off Oahu's North Shore and a 9-footer off East Oahu. (Reference books say the white sharks can grow as long as 21 feet.)

Shark populations reduced

State-sponsored shark fishing programs have shown that Hawaii's population of big sharks is readily reduced through concerted fishing pressure.

Researchers found that when large tiger shark populations dropped, the smaller nearshore sharks that tiger sharks eat increased in numbers. These sharks put more pressure on the shoreline fish supply.

Many shark species, tigers and whites included, are long-lived and produce few young. Because they don't reproduce quickly, their populations can remain depressed for a long time after heavy fishing pressure.

"Most of the sharks of the world are soon going to be on the endangered species list," Bail said.

Naughton said white sharks are now protected in many parts of the world because they've nearly been fished out. Bail said she hopes the large Niihau shark, like other parts of the marine ecosystem, is left alone.

"The last think I want is people scared or someone over there trying to catch it," Bail

said.

The only confirmed great white shark attack in Hawaii occurred in 1969 off Oahu, shortly after a dead whale had been removed from a nearby beach. The shark was identified from its tooth imprints in a surfboard.